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A FELLAH WEDDING AT SILOAM

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During a sojourn of about two years in Palestine I had frequent opportunities of attending the family festivities of the Muslims. Although much has been written about oriental wedding customs, I hope that the festival which I am about to describe may present a few new points of interest which may throw some light upon certain passages of the Song of Songs.

The phrase "immoveable East" will soon be no longer applicable, as the introduction of occidental learning and railroads is fast changing the customs of the people. Yet in places like Siloam, though near Jerusalem, the customs of the natives are perhaps not so much influenced by the introduction of foreign elements as other places more remote, because of the character of the people, which is said to be rather rough and bigoted. It is therefore not unlikely that the wedding customs observed here are ancient and have been preserved practically in their purity, especially since that village has always been a Muslim village, no Christians ever having lived there who might by their customs have somewhat altered those of the Muslims. Only of late a Jewish-Teminite colony has been established in the vicinity of Siloam, but this is practically another village.

The day of the bringing home of the bride is the grand finale of a Muslim fellah wedding. All the preparations have been made on the previous days, and now the last act may take its beginning. I pass over the description of the bath of the bride and the tonsorial beautifying of the bridegroom, as these preparations are always the same, and for obvious reasons are not public.

The first public function on the wedding day which we saw was the procession of the bridegroom. He was accompanied by all his friends and the men of the village who formed his escort, shouting and shooting as they were marching through the village and the Kidron valley and back again to Siloam. The words, Song of

Songs, 3:6 ff, may well have been spoken on just such an occasion by a bride, who, looking down from the home of her parents at Siloam, saw the bridegroom's procession ascending the steep heights as if coming up from the wilderness of Judea. We followed the procession and entered the house where the wedding feast was to be held. The room was soon cleared of women, and the professional



BRIDE AND BRIDEGROOM

entertainers began their music. While the guests were assembling (some wild-looking fellows were among them), the sun had set, and the evening meal (*el-asa*) for the guests was brought in. It consisted of large dishes of rice and mutton, boiled onions, tomatoes and *leben*, which the natives mixed together and ate, using instead of a spoon a piece of flap-cake-like bread, called *errij* (pl. *rurfān*). The natives with their hands made the rice into little balls, which they shoved into their mouths. We had spoons given to us, which it took a long time to procure; the explanation for this we found in the fact that the four or five spoons which we needed were of many different patterns and materials, and therefore may have been the

treasures of four or five different families. Six or eight persons ate out of one dish, and when they had finished, their places were taken by others. Hot sweetened milk was served after the meal was over, but only to a few chosen guests, us among others. Upon this, two or three cups of coffee were offered to these guests, after which the other guests partook of it also.

The wedding feast is for many the great occasion of the day, and no one was refused a part in the feast, though all the men of the village came, whether invited or not. But when the meal was over, the master of ceremonies (cf. *ὁ ἀρχιτρίκλινος*, John 2:9) stood up and mustered the guests with his eyes, when all at once, without further ceremonies, he took one by the hand and rather forcibly ejected him from the room. Assisted by some of his friends, he made several others depart in the same manner, in spite of a very active opposition on their part. The other guests were not in the least concerned by this occurrence. I could not find out the reason for this forcible ejection of some of the guests; but may it not have been that given by the Master in his well-known parable in Matt. 22:11-13.

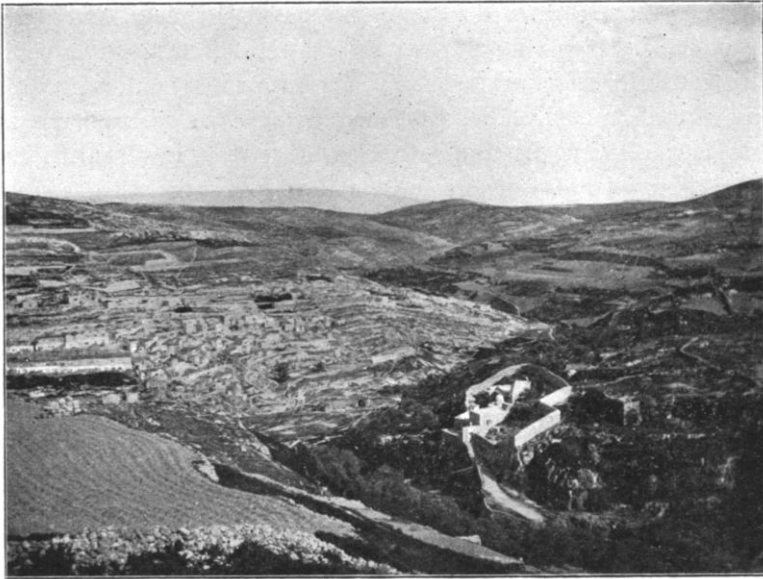
After quiet had been restored, the musicians tuned their instruments, for now the entertainment of the guests began. The usual instruments on such an occasion are the zither (*qānūn*), the mandolin (*ūd*), and the tambourine (*duff* or *daff*). The music is always accompanied by songs appropriate to the occasion. After some time the men began the sword-dance. While the musicians played, one of the guests took up a sword and whirled it around his head, twisting it skilfully around his fingers. In his long, flowing, white robes, the head well poised, brandishing the sword, every motion graceful and well directed, the body gently swinging from side to side, keeping time with the music, now throwing the sword into the air, he presented in the dimly illuminated room a magnificent spectacle. When tired, the performer handed the sword to another guest, who in turn executed the dance, trying to surpass his predecessor in the display of skill. Those who refused had to purchase their exemption by a small sum of money, which was given to the performing musicians. This gift is called *šubāš*.

When this entertainment was finished, the master of ceremonies

spread out upon the floor a kerchief, into which the wedding presents—small sums of money (*nqut*)—were put. Every one of the guests contributed his share, and the master of ceremonies duly announced the amount given, calling at the same time a blessing from God upon the giver; and if the money was given in honor of a particular person, he also announced that fact. Some gave at different times small sums of money to have their names and gifts called out several times. During this performance the merriment of the guests rose to its height. This little contribution was not so much a gift as a loan given to the new pair which the giver expects back under similar circumstances, and I have been told that account is kept of what has been given by the different families. After this contribution had been levied, the singing and dancing were continued. The bridegroom had no part in the amusements.

While the men passed the time in singing, music, and dancing in true oriental fashion, the women were having their own amusements together with the bride. To these we were now invited as a special mark of favor. The room, the upper room of the home of her parents, to which we were led, was filled with women. No men were present except the father of the bride and one or two of her nearest male relatives and her little brother. Here we saw the mother of the bride dance to the beating of two small kettle-drums. It was a graceful swinging of the body, while she lifted her arms in a rythmical motion, and showed coquettishly her well-shaped, bare feet. After the dance the women began to dress the bride on the opposite side of the room, forming a circle around her. While dressing her, they sang the typical marriage songs, wishing the bride all those things upon which the oriental woman sets her heart—children, gold, and grain. They praised her charms, even her sitting and walking. When fully dressed in her many colored garment, her hands profusely stained with henna, and on her head a wreath of flowers to which was fastened a long veil, she advanced toward us and saluted us by kissing our hands. Her forehead and hands were then anointed with saffron by a young male relative—a distinction which was also extended to us. Just before leaving the house of her mother, the mother anointed the breasts of the bride with an unguent composed of powdered mace, civet, and *semmen* (melted butter-ghee).

The bride was now ready to be delivered to her bridegroom; but one important thing had not yet been satisfactorily arranged, and that was the question of who was to receive a present from the bridegroom, he on such an occasion being considered the lawful prey of every male relative of the bride. In this particular case the paternal uncle of the bride had not been fully satisfied, and it took



THE VALLEY OF KIDRON

a long time of haggling and scolding to make the bridegroom understand his duty from the point of view of the uncle. This being settled, the bride having been kept under lock and key all the time, the eleven-year-old brother of the bride caused a great disturbance by refusing to give his consent to the marriage, because he had not received a sufficient number of *mejidies*. After much parleying, he was also satisfied, and he showed us triumphantly his spoils. The law of Deut. 22:15 having been done justice to rather ostentatiously, every obstacle seemed now to have been removed and the consummation of the marriage festival no longer threatened. But, on the contrary, the men having adjusted their claims, the women

wanted now to settle their affairs. The two prospective mothers-in-law, who so far had played an unimportant rôle in the festivities, saw in the lull which had for once occurred, their opportunity. This they eagerly seized, and soon the hillsides of the Kidron valley reverberated with volleys of invectives hurled by these gentle creatures at each other at a safe distance of about two hundred feet. The full-moon, with all the splendor which it can have only in the Orient, illumined the night like day, and Jerusalem with the Kidron valley lay before us in its magic light, like visions from another world. Surrounded by this magic scenery, these two wildly gesticulating and impassioned women, standing screaming at each other at the top of their voices, and the passive silence of the men, who in their long white robes and dusky faces looked like statues, presented a weird sight.

The sound of the clock announcing midnight was carried to our ears from Jerusalem, and the two women, having given vent to their feelings to their own satisfaction, each cursing the other and the rest of mankind, themselves included—the one declaring that she would not accept such a son-in-law, and the other vowing that she would never receive such a daughter-in-law—reminded the men for what purpose they had gathered, and, justice having been done to all, the bridal procession could now take place. The moon acted as torch and cast her chaste light over a scene which to people of finer sentiments would have meant so much, but which left untouched the souls and minds of these people who have to get everything by strife and dissimulation.

We advanced in procession from the house of the bride to that of the bridegroom at the end of the lane. The bride feigned reluctance and advanced very slowly toward her future husband. Etiquette requires this.¹ The women were singing all the time and uttering that peculiar trill which defies description or comparison. It resembles *lululululu* when chanted quickly. When the bride arrived at the doorpost, she put a little leaven to her forehead and fastened some to the doorpost, and entered the room with a water-jar

¹ A friend told me that at an elaborate wedding in Jerusalem, in one of the first Muslim families, it took the bride almost an hour to cross the room to where the bridegroom awaited her.

on her head, symbolizing her future duties. The bride walked to the wall opposite the door and squatted upon the floor. Upon this a woman decorated her forehead, cheeks, chin, and nose with gold leaf, while the bridegroom was standing in his best suit on her left. The decoration being finished, the bride rose, and the bridegroom lifted her veil, by which act he formally accepted her as his wife. After this



RELATIVES OF THE BRIDEGROOM

her mother, who was standing upon the left of the bridegroom, spread out over her hands a kerchief, into which every guest put a present of money. Before putting the money upon the cloth, the women touched the forehead of the bride with it; some also touched that of the bridegroom. The bridegroom, who had hitherto been absolutely passive, as if the entire affair did not concern him at all, made a beginning by putting his gold pieces, the purchasing price, upon the napkin, after having more than gently touched with every gold piece the forehead of the bride, leaving a deep, red scar. This money contribution was the last act and ended the wedding.

This wedding was a *mutradale*—i. e., an exchange of brides.

The young ten-year-old sister of the bridegroom was married to the eleven-year-old brother of the bride; but as the bride possessed a beautiful white or ivory-colored skin (cf. Song of Songs, 7:5), which is highly valued, a sum of 130 francs had to be paid for her in addition.

The bride whose wedding I have described held no sword before her face when on her way to her future husband. I may have overlooked it. But I saw another bringing home of a bride who came from another village. She was riding upon a horse, was thickly veiled, and held a sword before her face. The men danced in front of her, with their arms locked together. One man, who was in front of them, swinging a sword in his hand, beat time. The women followed behind the bride, making a joyful noise and uttering that peculiar trill. The bride remained passive all the time.

I was told that in some parts of Palestine the bridegroom welcomes his bride by giving her a blow upon the head with a club in token that he is her master.

It was long after midnight when we took leave of our kind hosts, the parents of the bride. The father accompanied us to the end of the village down the hill as far as the Fountain of the Virgin, shook hands with us, and thoughtfully retraced his steps.